

Thomasville's COVID-19 Pandemic Small Business Grant Program Summary

Written and Submitted by Michael Brandt, Thomasville City Manager

The COVID-19 pandemic and the shutdowns that resulted from the efforts of the State government to fight the spread of the virus have hit local businesses especially hard. Many had to either close or have limited operations since March 2020. Thomasville, like many other communities, watched its local businesses suffer significant revenue losses resulting in rising unemployment as businesses were forced to furlough and/or lay off employees.

Early during the pandemic, city staff worked with the local Chamber of Commerce and the Tourism Commission to provide information about programs and opportunities available to local businesses, but without a source of funding to support the businesses financially, there was only so much we could do. With the passage of the CARES Act and the resulting funds for local governments provided by it, the Thomasville City Council was quick to instruct staff to develop business support grants. The city received nearly \$750,000, of which one-third was allocated for these grants.

As Assistant City Manager, I was tasked with developing the grant program. After consulting with the NC Pandemic Response Office (NCPRO) we established four specific grant programs. The first was a grant to our local Tourism Authority to allow for the continued marketing of the community. The other three grants focused on businesses that were most affected by the executive order shutdowns including bars and entertainment facilities, daycares, and other small businesses.



For those businesses that had to completely shut down, including bars and event venues, we created a grant focused on those businesses.

NCPRO specifically expressed concerns about daycares and childcare facilities. Their staff had identified that without safe childcare facilities, it would not be possible for parents, especially women, to re-enter the workforce.

We also created a general business support grant for businesses that had less than 25 employees, regardless of the type of business, as long as they could show a significant revenue loss.

In an effort to be inclusive to the business community, the City Council instructed staff to award at least 15 percent of the available funds to small businesses that meet the state definition of minority-owned businesses. A minority business is defined as a business that is at least 51 percent owned by one or more minority persons or socially or economically disadvantaged persons.

In order to make sure that businesses were following proper health protocols, one of the requirements of the grant program was that all grantees were required to complete the online “Count on Me NC” program for safely re-opening businesses. This provided an educational tool for participants, and provided information that could be shared by our Tourism Commission staff as part of their pandemic response marketing campaign.

The City hired the Piedmont Regional Council to help manage the grant program. They brought a wealth of knowledge and expertise in running economic development grant programs. Without their expert staff we would not have been as successful with the program.

The grant program was finalized in August and launched in September. Due to the limitations of the CARES Act funds, the program ended in early December 2020. There were over 100 inquiries from local businesses, with 40 qualifying for a grant. Of these, four were childcare facilities, eight were businesses completely shut down, and 28 were general small businesses. In addition, I am proud to report that over 50 percent of the awardees met the minority-owned business requirements, and three were veteran-owned. Grantees self-reported that the program helped to save or support over 150 jobs.

As part of the reporting process, participants were asked how the grant program helped them. Below are some of the responses:

I am beyond grateful and have much appreciation for the City of Thomasville to allow Small Businesses this grant to continue to serve our customers and keep my Business running. This has lifted a huge weight mentally so I am not having to stress for a few months about how the bills were going to get paid. Also the training video for the Count on Me was very eye opening to explain in detail this process that we all need to be following as Business Owners and will help ensure Safety is our #1 priority – Mario Herrera, Classic Barbershop

The impact from receiving these funds has been huge. At the start of the COVID-19 outbreak, our court system in Davidson County virtually stopped in Mid-March, and did not resume full operations until mid-June. Although attorneys were able to appear in court on limited, emergency matters, the frequency and duration of my court appearances was reduced dramatically. This had a significant impact on my billable hours, and in turn, caused my income to drop significantly. Without consistent income each month, it was becoming difficult to meet my monthly obligations in regard to rent and utilities. Since I was able to use these funds to pay my rent, I was able to continue to represent my clients without the fear of having to close my practice indefinitely. My practice centers on representation of domestic violence victims and people impacted by custody disputes, so my ability to continue was crucial – Meredith Harris, Harris Law Office

The award is extremely useful especially when we were mandated to closed from March until the end of May. With no income being generated, all utilities bills and rents were still due. And with Covid-19 cases rising on a daily, as a small business we have to limit our number of clients. – Trinh Nguyen, Tulip Nails

The pandemic is still affecting area businesses. With the passage of the American Rescue Plan Act by the Federal government, we are already having discussions of how we can continue to support our local business community.